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The Workshop

A Monthly Journal, devoted to Progress of the Useful Arts.

EDITED BY
I. SCHNORR AND OTHERS.

VOL. VIII.

Nº. 4.

THE LATE IMPERIAL PORCELAIN MANUFACTORY IN VIENNA.*

By

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IV.

FOURTH PERIOD. DECLINE AND FALL.

The death of Baron von Sorgenthal, and the appointment of Niedermayer as director, brought no change either to the interior or exterior situation of the factory. Sorgenthal had continued to mark everything as before with the Austrian arms in blue, and only added an impressed cypher of the date and a number. So it remained without any change for some time, till by the side of the blue mark, or in its place, the arms were sharply impressed on the material itself without any colouring. In those articles which had the same mark, but different numbers, the style and decoration were in the beginning entirely of one character. The year 1805 marks no epoch whatever in the history of taste.

But external circumstances shortly afterwards arose which disturbed and impeded the quiet progress of the factory. The war period had hitherto passed without materially affecting its prosperity, but the year 1809 was marked with danger and brought with it stagnation. A hundred and fifty of the workmen joined the army: the factory equipped them and supported their families. Full employment was not to be found even for the rest, for the war interfered with the carriage of wood and earth on the Danube. After the peace followed a depreciation of the currency, a general stagnation of trade, and a temporary suspension to the introduction of coffee: when this ceased the factory sold within a few weeks 35000 coffeecups and saucers.

The events of the year 1813 restored peace to the continent, and in 1818, when the centenary of the institution was celebrated, the factory had risen again to its highest point, having more than a hundred souls in its employment. A splendid exhibition of its productions, which it took the opportunity of arranging in the newly decorated halls in the wing in the Alserbach, showed that it maintained its excellence in every respect. This was however by no means the case after this.

We may call this first period of Niedermayer's direction the most flourishing time of the factory, and yet allow that in point of taste it was already declining. Niedermayer had only continued his direction according to the spirit of his predecessor, though perhaps in the eyes of the uninitiated he had soared somewhat higher. Many of the old artists still survived, and new ones were added to them, the two Riggs, Reinhold, Schufried, Weichselbaum, Liep &c. But the taste of the times was itself declining, and there was a constant change of artists, without the cognisance perhaps of the factory.

We said just now that Niedermayer had in the eyes of the uninitiated soared higher than his predecessor; that is, he had attempted tasks in porcelain painting which were beyond the powers of the material. Sorgenthal had taken every pains to produce vessels, but these of the utmost possible beauty and richness. With the exception of biscuitwork, manufactured during his time already to satisfy the taste for fancy articles and *objets d'art*, he seems to have restricted himself within these limits. The same works naturally made their appearance under Niedermayer, as for example, a set of vases with copies of Rubens, in the Liechtenstein gallery, painted

* Continued from page 33 *ante*.
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by Liep, which are among the very finest productions of the factory in this style. But Niedermayr did not stop there. He desired to enter into competition with painting, and hence there came out on large and small porcelain plates a series of paintings even of sacred subjects, as pretentious as oilpaintings, of which they are but copies in by far the most cases. Thus both material and technic were pressed into a service quite unadapted to their nature.

More especially was this the fate of flower-painting, of which a number of plates are specimens in the Austrian Museum. If we look upon such paintings as an end, we may claim the best period of flower-painting in the Vienna factory for Niedermayr's time instead of Sorgenthal's. At first these paintings were in the style of the old masters, some of them copies from van Huysum and Rachel Ruysch, but they soon became originals, and with their originality the colouring became gayer and gayer according to the taste of the times. As in the nineteenth century flowers were almost the only motives in decoration, these works had at all events the merit of keeping up the skill of the artist; but on the other hand they tended to favour a rough naturalism, which has made the productions of art-industry in respect to flower painting so intolerable during the last four or five decades.

But even before this naturalistic taste in floral decoration had overgrown everything, it had begun to show itself in the more delicate and finer articles. This was not so much the case with the forms as with the painted ornamentation. The shapes of the vessels in Sorgenthal's time suffered, as we have stated above, from too great stiffness and the straitness of their lines; since the year 1810 there has been perhaps a somewhat bolder curvature of the lines, together with a more or less pronounced use of antique clay vessels, an example of which may be seen in the vase represented in No. 18. But these elegant forms for the most part had to give way again before obsolete Rococo-motives. It was different with the decorations of the so-called light designs. No progress was made as to these since the year 1805. On the contrary we can easily perceive, if we compare them with the vessels that are marked with the date of the years either previous to them or following them, how deficient they are in freeness of fancy, in richness of invention, in elegance of design. The ornamental compositions are poorer, less agreeable, and by the introduction of naturalistic flowers, coarser and thicker, till at last they are entirely dominated by the decorations. The small genre pictures also, and landscapes become more and more rare.

The defects which the stream of time unconsciously brought with it under Niedermayr, were enhanced by his successors. There was a constant tendency to the neglect of art, and to the pursuit of commercial and material advantage. It was not seen that this was just the way to undermine the very existence of the establishment. As soon as the principle was accepted, that the State should not be the manufacturer, the factory had only one justification for its existence as an Art-insti-

tute, namely in the pursuit of an ideal perfection, in being in advance of all its competitors in experiments and models, and in adopting the more artistic objects which the private establishments dared not undertake for themselves. Sorgenthal had shown, while the institution was under his direction, that these objects were not incompatible with commercial advantage, but it was deprived of this justification by his successors with whom commercial profit was the only consideration.

Niedermayr's immediate successor, the councillor Benjamin Scholz, who undertook the direction in 1827, commenced his operations under the guidance of this false principle. He purchased a cheaper earth, which was naturally of inferior and impure quality, and required more manipulation, and so produced an inferior kind of porcelain. Scholz died in 1834, and was succeeded by Baumgartner, who being a Naturalist and Chemist, had still less feeling for art, thought only of technical improvements, and introduced steam engines into the factory. His principle was to produce cheap goods for practical uses, and thus looked upon the institution from the low stand-point of an ordinary factory without the slightest idea of its real mission. In 1844 he was succeeded by Baron Leithner who continued to pursue exactly the same path. His idea was that the institution was to be of no expense to the state, and this idea he carried out successfully, excepting only during the disturbances of the year 1848.

But if the institution cost the state nothing, it brought it no profit, either material or ideal. It left art to decay, and artists to starve, while no fresh ones replaced them, for there was need of none in the path on which it had now entered. At most there were still flower painters of naturalistic tendency, with which kind of decoration it was thought that art might be satisfied. For more important tasks, which the court from time to time demanded, it was thought sufficient to copy or adapt the Grecian shapes and decorate them with flowers. We give a specimen from this period of decay, and of a better though heavier kind, in a plate with a floral ornamentation, No. 19. It is part of a large dinner service, originally intended as a present for George IV. of England, who however chose in preference some baskets of Tokayer, and it has now found its way to Siam and Japan, while a portion of it remains in the Austrian Museum. Generally speaking, all the productions of this period are without the slightest interest, and will not repay any further description or representation.

It was not until Alexander Lowe was intrusted with the direction after Leithner in the year 1856 that efforts began again to be attempted in a more artistic direction. At least it was Lowe himself, who though a Chemist, recognised this, but he met with no support and had not the means to make any energetic advance. The ideal tradition of Sorgenthal and Niedermayr being long interrupted it was necessary to make a fresh beginning. There was a want of Artists in porcelain, a want of models in form and ornament, a want even of any style in art to which to appeal. Nevertheless all that was pos-



No. 18.

sible was done. An eminent arcanist and chemist, Rosch by name, who is still active in the province of art-industry, supported Lowe's efforts most energetically, restored the use of raised gold, once a speciality of old Vienna, and introduced also the application of lithographed ornaments with enamel colours on porcelain. The old drawings of the factory, which still contained a rich treasure of charming ornamentations, were collected and partly made use of, a small museum of porcelain articles from different manufactories, for the disposal of which scarcely any means existed, was begun and an art-library afterwards added to it. Instead of professional porcelain

artists, the aid of architects was for a time resorted to. Among these Anton Croner supplied a number of elegant designs for cups and plates. A specimen is given in No. 20 from a service ordered for the Archduke Wilhelm.

But all these efforts of an awakened zeal for a reform of taste and of art-industry, though they met with extraordinary support, were without any tangible result. On the principle that there was no justification for the existence of a state factory, and by the efforts of rival manufactories, a bill was brought into parliament under the ministry of Schmerling, for the abandonment of the factory. The bill was passed, the ministry accepted it,



No. 19.



No. 20,

and in 1864 the establishment was finally closed, to the great sorrow of the court and the general public, which increased more and more when in the following years the Austrian private establishments seemed little inclined to any artistic reform.

The factory is given up, but it is not forgotten: all the good works it has produced, especially those of the time of Sorgenthal and Niedermayr have now become antiques, are much in request, and obtain exceedingly enhanced prices. It has called into existence a new branch of industry, in the fabrication of imitations and forgeries, which is now carried on with energy. Some excellent imitations have proceeded from the manufactory of Fischer in Herend, but the firm is proud of its skill, and places its own mark by the side of that of Vienna. It is not so with others. From the sweepings of the factory which were sold off, a quantity of white porcelain vessels, partly of antique form and all stamped with the blue mark, have come into the possession of the public. As the material and mark are both genuine, it is exceedingly difficult to discover

the forgery, and it is frequently the case that it can only be discovered by comparing the impressed date, which is generally new, with the style of the ornaments and painting. Failing the white and marked porcelain, old objects of inferior decoration are sought, the painting scraped off and repainted in a richer and more highly prized style. There would be no difficulty indeed, if the factories undertook to do it, for the porcelain painters to fabricate new articles in the old shapes with the blue mark and impressed date, but then the material would not be genuine, and the eye of the connoisseur could more easily discover the imposture.

It is thus possible that we meet at the present day with many a well preserved coffee service of apparently old Vienna porcelain, and whole sets of plates with figure paintings. It is a pity that any one should allow himself to be deceived, but the existence of the trade shows that the fame of the Vienna factory is not extinguished, but is even in a measure increased.

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



Nos. 1 and 2. French, 1540. Wood Carvings from Choir of Essômes Church.